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SOME ASPECTS OF THE HISTORY OF THE ORIGIN OF SYPHILIS

TRANSMUTATION FROM FRAMBESIA TO SYPHILIS

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THE beginning of syphilis is shrouded in mystery. The land of its origin has been sought, but no people seem desirous of giving its country the ignominy of being the birthplace of the disease.

Claims have been made that the Bible "leprosy" was syphilis, and that the diseases described by Greek and Latin authors of medical works as destructive skin diseases were unrecognised syphilis. It is debatable, however, if syphilis, as we now know it, was known to the Old World prior to the return of Columbus from his trip to the West Indies.

Salvador Brau, a Porto Rican, has made a study of the origin of syphilis in the West Indies. He insists that there is no evidence of syphilis having existed in these islands. He says that there was no word in the old Indian tongue by which such a disease was known, nor was there a treatment for such a devastating sickness. "Why," he asks, "if the disease were thought to come from the Indies, did the disease in Europe not receive the name of 'Mal de Indies' among the list which included 'French sickness,' 'Italian sickness,' 'Gallic sickness,' 'Portuguese sickness,' 'Spanish sickness,' etc., by which every region (following the great spread of syphilis, after the disbanding of the unsuccessful army of Charles VIII.) attempted to saddle on its neighbour the infamy of the disease's birth?"

The fact is, that following the return of Columbus from his voyage to the New World a disease was newly recognised which spread like wildfire. Between 1496 to 1500, the known world from Ireland on the west to Japan on the east became infected. The disease at the time of

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its appearance, as described by the medical men of the time, was a more destructive one than known at the present day. This gives credence to the idea that it was a new disease among the people.

During my sojourn in the tropics I became interested in phases of frambesia tropica and its relation to syphilis. The possibility always appealed to me that the spirochete of frambesia, which we can claim to be American, may have become the spirochete of syphilis upon transfer to Europeans. In this connection it is interesting to note that one of the earliest works accredited as proving that syphilis in Europe originated in America is entitled "Tratado llamado Fruto de todos Santos contra el mal de le ysla Espanola hecho por masestre Rodrigo de Isla ciujano vezino de lisboa para comun e general provecho de los pacientes Enfermos de las semejante Enfermedad que vulgarmente es llamado 'Bubas.'" Translation of this is: "Treatise, entitled Fruit of All Saints against the Disease of the Island Espanola by Master Rodrigo de Isla, Surgeon and Citizen of Lisbon, to the Common and General Good of Those Suffering from the Disease in Question, Commonly Called 'Bubas.'"

"Bubas" is one of the synonyms of frambesia tropica. It is used in the Spanish colonies. It is also of great interest to relate the chronology of the uncovering of the spirochetel etiology of frambesia and syphilis. The *Spirocheta pertenuis* was discovered by Castellani in February, 1905, on the Island of Ceylon. This slightly antedated Schaudinn's demonstration of the *Spirocheta pallida*, March, 1905 (published May, 1905). In another section of the globe, West Africa, Wellmann independently demonstrated a spirochete in frambesia in July, 1905.

There must be general acceptance of the possibility of transmutation of the spirochete. It has been advanced as lending credence to the theory that frambesia tropica is a form of syphilis changed by climatic conditions and by centuries of passage through races resident in the tropics. It lends equal credence to the possibility that syphilis is a form of frambesia which has been changed by transfer to the white European.

Our present knowledge on transmutation of bacteria is too meagre to warrant its further discussion. It may be interesting to record that among certain elements of the race-track there is general acceptance of the idea

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that horses acquire the disease we know as dourine (horse syphilis) through sexual contact with syphilitic humans. The fact that dourine is caused by the *Trypanosoma equiperdum* and syphilis by another spiral organism is not considered as disproving the possibility of such transfer by those who believe in this theory.

When it comes to the origin of syphilis it has been my experience that each one who has a conclusion maintains it despite the mass of evidence adduced by the proponents of any other theory. And there is much to be said on both sides.